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SUBJECT: Thai Civilian Nuclear Energy Program: Renewed Focus and
Opportunity for Cooperation

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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: In spite of anticipated community protests, Thailand appears committed to developing its civilian nuclear energy and research programs. The Royal Thai Government's (RTG) Office of Atoms for Peace (OAP) hosted the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) earlier this month to discuss Thailand as a leading recipient for radioactive sources, and the National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) to discuss potential technical assistance on nuclear security and safety protocols. The visits paralleled increased public relations efforts, not altogether successful, by the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT) to prepare the Thai public for a decision to embrace nuclear power generation. END SUMMARY.

U.S. Delegations and the Office of Atoms for Peace

¶2. (SBU) The Office of Atoms for Peace (OAP) hosted delegations from the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) on November 9 and 10, and from the U.S. National Nuclear Security Administration (NNSA) on November 9 through 11. Both groups came to Thailand to strengthen their relationships with OAP, the regulatory body for the Thai government's civilian nuclear energy program. A separate group from the NRC will visit Bangkok in the first week of December to attend an International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) conference.

¶3. (SBU) According to the NRC, Thailand ranks 7th in the world among countries listed on license applications to receive radioactive sources. (Note: The NRC is the USG entity that issues export licenses for radioactive sources. End Note.) Although appearing as a client on an export license does not necessarily mean that an actual transaction will take place, Thailand frequently receives radioactive sources for use in academic research, industrial applications, and the irradiation of medical devices, dog toys, and spices, among other items. Officials from the NRC indicated that there is nothing of concern about the types of sources that Thailand has been receiving. Iridium, for example, which is used for radiography, has a half-life of only 74 days and must be replaced frequently.

¶4. (SBU) While OAP did not specifically discuss technical assistance for the Thai nuclear energy program from NRC in their November meetings, OAP has expressed interest in such assistance both prior and since. In June 2009, OAP sent a letter to NRC requesting assistance with laws and regulations for nuclear power plants and human resource development. NRC replied in July, offering assistance to OAP. On November 18, OAP sent an additional request to NRC regarding the possibility of an intensive training session for OAP officials in order to prepare OAP to fulfill its

role in Thailand's civilian nuclear power program, which forecasts an operational 1000 MW nuclear power plant in the year 2020 (reftel).

15. (SBU) In its conversations with OAP, the NNSA delegation indicated the goal of its visit was to evaluate the Thai government's efforts in the following areas, with an eye toward potential assistance: safety analysis of the research reactor OAP operates in Bangkok, the development of regulations regarding nuclear power safeguards, low-level radiation waste management, and ratification of the IAEA Additional Protocol (AP). (Note: the IAEA AP ratification process involves several entities within the Royal Thai Government (RTG), including: the Prime Minister's Office, the Thai Cabinet, and both Houses of Parliament. End Note.). OAP welcomed NNSA's offer to provide technical experts to facilitate the complicated ratification process.

The Nuclear Program in the News

16. (U) At the same time as the NRC and NNSA visits, local media coincidentally ran stories regarding the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT) and its role in Thailand's nuclear energy program. EGAT commissioned private firm Burns and Roe Asia to conduct a related feasibility study to be completed in May 2010 (reftel). As part of this study, Burns and Roe is evaluating 15 sites based on the following criteria: economics, especially with regard to the cost of accessing a water supply, the environment and population, geological suitability, political stability, and community acceptance. In response to our queries regarding the media stories (some of which turned out to be inaccurate), an EGAT official told EconOff that environmental concerns would far outweigh the other factors and would comprise roughly 50 percent of the final evaluation. Burns and Roe plans to narrow the list of 15 to 5 by

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the completion of the study next May. According to the EGAT official, the five potential sites are located in four provinces: Surat Thani and Nakorn Srithammart in the south, Trat on the coastal border with Cambodia, and Nakorn Sawan in the central region. (Note: Articles and editorials presenting predictable arguments both in favor and against Thailand's civilian nuclear program appeared almost daily in local Thai press following release of information on the location of the sites being evaluated. End Note).

17. (SBU) An EGAT official told EconOff that, in support of the civilian nuclear program, EGAT has initiated a public relations (PR) campaign that will focus on local communities in these provinces. At a PR event on November 2 in Surat Thani province, protests erupted at a forum in which EGAT had planned an informational session about the realities of nuclear power. Several hundred locals turned out in the district of Tha Chana to protest the possibility of a power plant being built in the area. EGAT told us that they anticipated this protest, as well as strong opposition from NGOs and local groups throughout the process of developing a civilian nuclear energy program. In this particular case, an official from EGAT said that the protests were led by a member of the opposition Puea Thai party to undermine the efforts of the Abhisit administration and to protect property he personally owns near this site. (Comment: We have not had a chance to speak with the NGOs involved in the protest.)

18. (SBU) COMMENT: The Office of Atoms for Peace (OAP)'s continued interest in USG assistance on Thailand's civilian nuclear energy program reflects the commitment to nuclear power development within the RTG. We should consider ways to support its requests for technical assistance to push forward our nuclear security and safety goals, and to assist this treaty ally with the development of its energy production infrastructure. END COMMENT.

19. (SBU) For the use of interested Washington agencies, key contacts at OAP include the following officials:

Mr. Chaivat Toskulkao
Secretary General of OAP

Mr. Kittisak Chinudomsub
Director, Bureau of Radiation Safety Regulation

Ms. Usa Kullaprawithaya
Director, International Cooperation Group

Ms. Siriratana Biramontri
Director, Bureau of Technical Support for Safety Regulation

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